

FLASH BACK

A leading man with minimal acting experience; a revolving door of potential directors; no daily shooting schedule; a rock soundtrack by Queen; production design by legendary Italian Oscar-winner Danilo Donati; a grand and ambitious space opera that instead became a campy comedy. *Flash Gordon's* journey to the screen in 1980 is every bit as bonkers and entertaining as the movie itself, and was instrumental in turning a big budget misfire into a much-loved cult classic that has endured for 40 years.

Words Scott Hocking

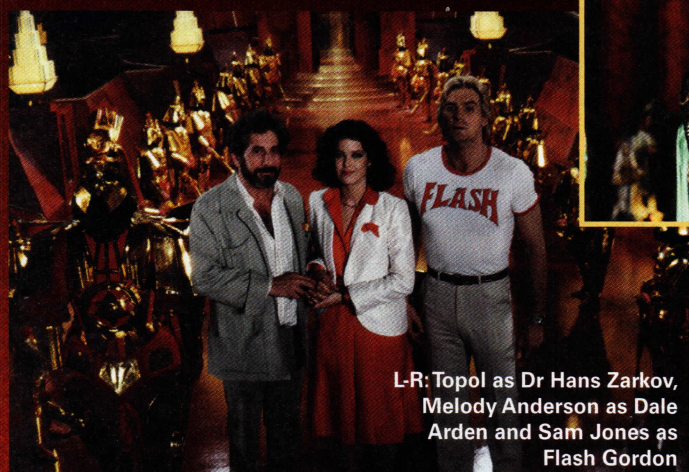
A BRIEF HISTORY OF FLASH GORDON

Created by Alex Raymond as a competitor to fellow space hero Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon made his comic strip debut in January 1934 and became an instant success as a syndicated newspaper strip. The character was a polo player who must join forces with friends Dale Arden and Dr. Hans Zarkov to save the Earth from the approaching planet Mongo and its evil ruler, Emperor Ming the Merciless. The comic strip would inspire three serials starring Buster Crabbe in 1938–1940, a live-action TV series in 1954, an animated series in 1979, and of course the feature film we're about to discuss...

THE STAR

Both Kurt Russell and Arnold Schwarzenegger were approached to play Flash but the role ultimately went to Sam Jones, a former US Marine whose claim to fame at the time was as a contestant on a TV dating show and a small part in Blake Edwards' *10* (1979). Jones reportedly clashed with producer Dino De Laurentiis and quit during post-production, resulting in much of his dialogue being dubbed by voice actor Peter Marinker. Moreover, he later sued De Laurentiis when the contractual sequels to the film never eventuated. Fortunately, Jones's wooden performance is overshadowed by gleefully OTT turns by the late, great Max von Sydow as Emperor Ming and bellowing Brit Brian Blessed as the leader of the Hawkmen, Prince Vultan ("Gordon's alive!").

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L-R: Topol as Dr Hans Zarkov,
Melody Anderson as Dale
Arden and Sam Jones as
Flash Gordon



Brian Blessed

THE SOUNDTRACK

Flash Gordon was one of the first instances of a rock band scoring a film. Pink Floyd were tipped to provide the soundtrack but it was Queen who gave

the film its sonic punch, and an iconic theme song that shot to No. 10 on the UK singles chart. The band had to squeeze *Flash* into a busy schedule that included recording their eighth studio album, *The Game*. That's not their only contribution to the movie – it was Freddie Mercury who designed the famous *Flash Gordon* logo. Queen would later score Russell Mulcahy's *Highlander* in 1986.

THE PRODUCER

Although seen to be cashing in on the success of *Star Wars*, prolific Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis – whose Hollywood ventures included the 1976 *King Kong* remake and *Orca* (1977) – had strived for almost a decade to bring *Flash Gordon* to the screen. But his vision for the film didn't exactly gel with the tone established by the comic strips and serials. "Dino wanted to make *Flash Gordon* humorous," screenwriter Lorenzo Semple Jr. told *Starlog* magazine in 1983. "At the time, I thought that was a possible way to go, but, in hindsight, I realise it was a terrible mistake. We kept fiddling around with the script, trying to decide whether to be funny or realistic. That was a catastrophic thing to do, with so much money involved... I never thought the character of Flash in the script was particularly good. But there was no pressure to make it any better. Dino had a vision of a comic-strip character treated in a comic style. That was silly, because *Flash Gordon* was never intended to be funny. The entire film got way out of control."

THE DIRECTOR

The filmmakers eager to direct *Flash Gordon* were a distinguished and eclectic bunch indeed. George Lucas approached Dino but the producer wanted Federico Fellini, who declined (oh what might have been!). Lucas instead shot his own space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. Nicolas Roeg, who had turned David Bowie into an alien in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), was also in the running and had worked on a script for almost a year before departing over creative differences with Dino. The gig ultimately went to British filmmaker Mike Hodges, who had helmed the Michael Caine classic *Get Carter* (1971). With no daily shooting schedule, a difficult leading man and sets constructed ad hoc, the odds were stacked against him, but Hodges remained sanguine: "Once I realised the film was in many ways out of my control, I relaxed and made it up as I went along. I loved it!" he told *Empire*.

FLASH FEATURES

- Interview with Director Mike Hodges
- Episode 24 of *Flash Gordon* (1979-82): *The Survival Game/Gremlin's Finest Hour*
- Sam Jones On His Acting Start
- Entertainment Earth on *Flash Gordon* Merchandise
- Bob Lindenmayer Discusses Deleted Scenes and Original Endings
- 35th Anniversary Green Room
- 35th Anniversary Reunion Featurette
- Renato Casaro Extended Interview
- Brian Blessed Anecdotes
- Melody's Musings
- On the Soundtrack
- Easter Eggs

• *Flash Gordon*
is out on DVD,
Blu-ray & 4K
on Aug 26

